



County Commissioners COVID-19 Update to our Communities

May 21, 2020

Dear Lewis and Clark County Community,

We are several months into the COVID-19 pandemic and how our world has changed! While there are still many uncertainties, we continue to look for solutions on how to navigate these uncharted waters. However, one thing remains the same: Lewis and Clark County government continues to operate and figure out how to balance accountability to the taxpayers with the health and safety of the community and our employees.

The operation of government has never ceased as we work to comply with the CDC, Lewis and Clark Public Health, and the Governor's directives. Navigating the challenges of finding a balance and putting new protocols in place has come with one constant directive from the Commissioners: be kind, be generous, and be thoughtful.

On May 20, County elected officials met to discuss the challenges each has faced in this pandemic, as well as future planning efforts. We want ensure that despite being separate elected offices, the County is working together as a team. With direction from Lewis and Clark Public Health, "adapt and overcome" is the common theme.

Leo Gallagher, County Attorney, said they are seeing a record number of filings, although trials for most of April and all of May and June have been vacated due to difficulties summoning a jury in the midst of COVID-19. Criminal trials are now set for later in the summer, including several high profile cases. This will result in a huge workload the second half of the year. At the same time, the Civil Department is assisting Public Health in upholding its and the Governor's COVID-19 directives and responding to inquiries, along with helping the Commissioners move forward with several controversial issues.

With all the trials later this summer, Clerk of Court Angie Sparks said they are determining how to safely bring in and select jurors, and prevent crowding in courtrooms. Many options are under consideration, including but not limited to

larger venues or bringing in fewer people at a time. Each option comes with challenges and staff are working hard to find solutions.

Sheriff Leo Dutton and his office have been part of the Unified Health Command alongside Lewis and Clark Public Health, Helena Police Department and St. Peters Health. Taking a balanced and thoughtful approach, they have worked closely with Public Health to educate the public and help enforce the Governor's and Public Health orders. Keeping COVID-19 out of the Detention Center also continues to be a high priority. Protocols are in place and continue to evolve but this is an ongoing concern. Alternative locations have been established should an inmate become infected and isolation required, but thankfully this has not yet been necessary.

On the education front, County Superintendent of Public Schools Katrina Chaney, shared some anecdotes from her work with rural schools. Wolf Creek reports it has had almost 100% participation with online learning. Kids, teachers and parents throughout the county are all working incredibly hard. While it seems kids are keeping up, it is still too soon to know the academic effects of three months of virtual learning.

Clerk and Recorder/Treasurer Paulette DeHart oversees Elections, Motor Vehicles, Property Taxes, Records and Treasurers offices. COVID-19 has effected all these operations, yet they continue to adapt.

The June 2, 2020, Primary Election was changed to mail ballot only and staff has been working to ensure it goes smoothly and social distancing is practiced for those that do come into the Elections office. Looking past the Primary, the General Election will pose challenging if it remains a polling place election. Several hundred election judges are needed and are typically over the age of 65. With this population being high risk for COVID-19, few may wish to participate and finding enough election judges may be difficult. Some solutions could include consolidating locations so fewer judges are needed and going to bigger venues where social distancing will be possible. These decisions won't be made for another few months.

Motor vehicles has been operating throughout the pandemic, but with reduced in-person services. With Phase one of the reopening, one appointment-only window and two regular windows are now open, with a third soon to be. As with everything, maintaining six feet between staff and customers, sanitizing, hand washing and wearing masks can help keep everyone safe.

The Commissioners continue moving forward on many issues such as Part 2 Zoning, Rural Improvement District decisions and the budget approval process and are working hard to ensure the public is still able to participate. Staff are evaluating the Last Chance Stampede and will make a decision in the coming weeks as to whether or not it will be held. In looking at the budget, revenues are down; however, so are expenditures. The finance office is looking closely at the budget, working with departments and more information will be forthcoming as the budget process moves forward this summer.

As an organization, staffing is a challenge across the board. Many employees have children at home doing online learning. Some employees are immunocompromised or live with someone who is immunocompromised and must keep themselves and their families safe by social distancing and continuing to stay at home. Essential services such as law enforcement have had to find creative ways to overcome these challenges and our HR department have been excellent in helping us all navigate. We want to work with employees to make sure they stay safe, yet also must find ways to continue to get the work done.

The Commission has been involved and doing everything we can to support Public Health, Disaster and Emergency Services and all the others. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and during the lull we seem to be in, we are all taking a hard look at how we move forward, particularly if we see an uptick in cases again.

While we face many challenges, not much is impossible. With an organization full of dedicated employees who want to serve, we will keep moving steadfastly forward and ultimately come out stronger and more resilient.

Know that we care about you and will do all we can to keep our communities safe.

In community spirit,

Lewis and Clark County Commissioners
Susan Good Geise
Jim McCormick
Andy Hunthausen